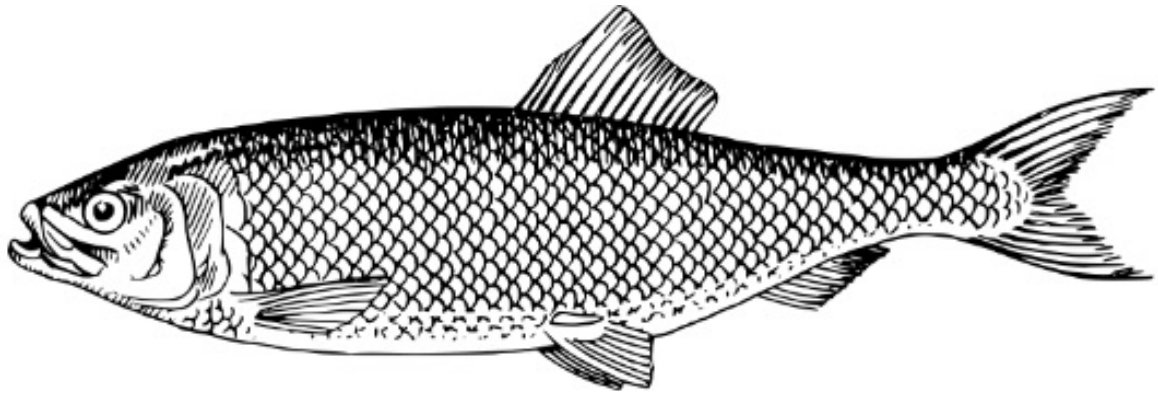


# HERRING TALES

*Good Stories for Home Schools*



*with activities*

A free resource from [www.herripedia.com](http://www.herripedia.com)

No 4: A Tin of Sardines

## A TIN OF SARDINES

Have you got a tin of sardines in the cupboard?



Sardine cans used to be opened with a key

Putting food in tins or cans started just over 200 years ago. Early food cans were made of tin plate - a thin sheet of iron coated with tin. Without the tin the iron would have gone rusty and the food would have tasted of metal.

The word *can* comes from *canister*, which, in turn, came from *kanystron*, an old Greek word for a basket made of reeds.

In those days, you had to write out the details of everything you sold. In 1839, at an early tin canister food company called Underwood's, they got tired of writing the word out in full, so they just wrote *cans*. A word was born! Hurrah!

What's all this got to do with herrings? Well, the French and the Spanish and the Portuguese make tins of sardines with pilchards. On the east coast of America they make them with herrings. In Norway they make them with herrings and sprats. Here in the UK we can make them with pilchards, herrings or sprats. It all depends what swims past your shores.



Herring



Pilchard



Sprat

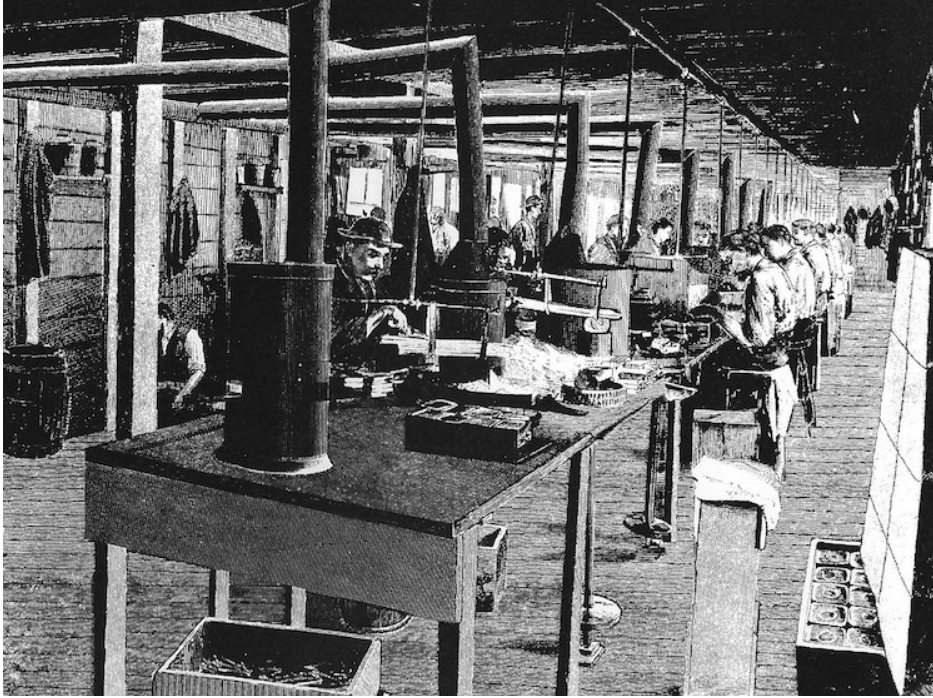
They're in same fish family. They look and taste fairly similar. Herrings are biggest, pilchards a bit smaller, sprats the smallest. Because people liked small cans of sardines, fishermen caught young fish. Young herrings, pilchards and sprats can be more-or-less the same size.

Norwegian sardines were cheaper. In *The Great Sardine Litigation*, the French went to the courts across Europe, saying sardines could only be pilchards. It all went on for 10 years, but in the end they won. Norwegian sardines are now *sild* (herrings) or *brisling* (sprats).

By the time they won, it was 1915 and everybody was busy with World War One. The French never tried to stop the Americans... So a can of sardines from the east coast of America is still filled with herrings.



This is a picture of an American sardine factory in 1885.  
The women are filling the cans by hand.



This is the soldering room where the lids of each tin were fixed on with solder, a kind of metal which melts easily.

These pictures were made in 1885. The lids were soldered on by hand. In one Norwegian factory, the solderer could seal 600 cans a day. Only a few years later, a machine was invented to do this. It folded and sealed 7,000 cans a day. Today a sardine canning machine can produce 4,000 an hour.

OK, let's open up that can of sardines! These days they usually have a handy ring-pull. They're not made of tin plate anymore, but people still call them tins. And you still have to be careful with the metal edge, which can be sharp.



Before you put them on toast, try to lift off the top half of the sardine. You have to be very careful. I actually think these are sprats. I bought them in Australia where they were called Wild Scottish Sardines. But in Australia sardines can be pilchards, herrings or sprats.



This is about three times as big as the fish was, so it was quite fiddly!

Can you see the vertebrae - the fish's backbone? It's like a little string of pearls. Each vertebra is tiny. And can you see the lines of slanting fine bones? You don't notice the bones when you're eating sardines - cooking in the can makes them really soft. Some cans contain larger sardines and it's a bit easier to see.

A lot of people say they can't be bothered with eating herrings and pilchards and sprats. 'There are too many bones,' they say. But they're really tasty, so more fool them! Why do you think herrings and pilchards and sprats have such small bones? Why do you think they have so many?



The smaller each vertebra is, the more flexible the fish's backbone. The more bones coming out from the backbone, the more control the fish has over every part of its body.

Think about your bones. You have 10 in an arm, 16 in a wrist... but 38 in a hand. More bones mean more precise movements. Try picking up something small just using your elbows!

Watch this short film of whales attacking a shoal of herrings. The whales are very clever, but watch how the herrings move. Watch how fast they are, how they twist and turn and change direction. Watch the shoal form again after each attack. The whales catch lots, but most of the shoal escapes. Their small vertebrae and the number of their fine bones make that possible.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFiZqypIDgs>





## Activities

Do a herring dance. How much you can bend your backbone? How quickly can you change direction? Is there someone else to dance with? Try doing the same movements as each other.

If you haven't eaten the sardines yet, try drawing the bones.

Have the sardines on toast. Mmmmhhh!



The pictures from the American sardine cannery are from *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States* by GB Goode (1887), reproduced in *Silver Harvest: The Fundy Weirmen's Story* by Ernest Wentworth and Richard Wilbur (1986). The video link is to a YouTube clip from the BBC's *Blue Planet*.